

Wet summer may prevent planned prescribed fires on the Refuge

by Doug Newbould

In my last Notebook article I wrote about various predictions for the 2006 fire season in Alaska—more than one of which forecasted another active summer of wildfires. Well, so far, I am happy to say those prognostications appear to be overstated. After the first five days of July, only 200 wildfires have been reported and those fires have burned only 212,113 acres. We have yet to experience any protracted periods of high pressure over the state or any major dry lightning busts like we witnessed during the past two fire seasons.

Of course, it is way too early to say the 2006 fire season is a bust. We may yet find ourselves in the middle of another breakout. The Parks Highway Fire near Nenana (115,500 acres) continues to make news and generate smoke, and there have been a handful of other large fires around the state this year. But all in all, it's been an easy fire season, and I for one—am glad. The last two years, back-to-back, produced more fires and blackened more acres than any other two consecutive years in the Alaska record book.

I have enjoyed the respite from wildfire this year on the Kenai: more time for family and friends, more time for fishing, and more time for pecking away at that honey-do list that has threatened to bury me if I don't get busy. Of course there is a downside, at least for my wife. She is seeing entirely too much of me this summer.

The other potential downside of a wet summer is that we may not be able to complete our planned prescribed fire projects on the Refuge. We have just about everything ready to go out at Mystery Creek—to burn two more of the units between the Enstar natural gas pipeline and Mystery Creek Road. Both units are about five miles north of the Sterling Highway and fifteen miles east-northeast of Sterling. We plan to ignite Unit 3 (2120 acres) first, and then Unit 2 (1000 acres) after Unit 3 cools down. But unless the ground fuels (duff, litter and moss) dry out more we will not be able to meet our approved burn plan objectives (remove/reduce black spruce hazard fuels and expose mineral soils for hardwood regeneration).

So, although more wet weather means more fishing time for me, it also means I won't get my Refuge honey-do list done. We have successfully burned three of the Mystery Creek Units since I came to the Kenai NWR in late 1997, and I know my bosses and perhaps a few moose out in the Mystery Hills would be pleased if I finished off the other three. I guess I'll just continue to watch the weather forecasts and my tide booklet—and see what tomorrow brings.

Doug Newbould has lived and worked on the Kenai Peninsula since 1991 and has been the Fire Management Officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1999. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.